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THE SOCIAL WORK OF A SUBURBAN CHURCH

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Suburban communities have a character of their own which differentiates them from the city or the country town, and they are remarkably alike, whether in the neighborhood of London or New York, Boston or San Francisco, whether composed mainly of laboring people, families of moderate income, or of the wealthier classes. The cause of this common resemblance seems to be found in the influence of the divided interest of the suburban citizen, whose home is in one community and his place of business or labor in another. In many cases the inhabitant of the suburb cannot vote in the city where his business is carried on, and he lacks interest in the village which is for him hardly more than a lodging place. The danger is, therefore, that he will fail to exhibit in either place the public spirit of a good citizen and will neglect to exert his influence for community interests anywhere. He may vote in state or national elections, but he is tempted to disregard his duty as a member of the social body in city or town. He settles down in a selfish and narrow routine which seriously affects his whole life, social, intellectual and religious. Jesse Williams, in the *August Century*, comments as follows on this peculiarity of the resident of the suburb: "He devotes the best part of the day to one narrow corner of the city: the rest of the time, not consumed on the train, is in the still more narrowing atmosphere of the suburbs. He neither gets all of the way into the life of the city nor clean out into the country. So his view of things has neither the perspective of robust rurality nor the sophistication of a man in the city and of it. His return to nature is only half way; his urbanity is suburbanity. Much of our literature, art and especially criticism shows the taint of the commuters' points of view." The suburban community cannot, as a rule, compete with the city in its provision for the intellectual life or for the healthful amusement of its residents. The city must be sought for the best of both. Nor are the sympathies of suburban residents appealed to by the need of the very

poor and by opportunities to labor in their behalf. For the very poor are in the city. Isolated towns in which men both live and labor develop a community consciousness which is largely lacking in the suburb. In such towns rich and poor, employer and employee, live in such close proximity that social needs are in some measure realized by all. In no place, on the other hand, more than in the suburb, is it true that "the one-half does not know how the other half lives." Intense poverty is infrequent in the suburb. When it does exist it is in some hidden corner, unrealized by the great majority of the neighboring population. There is thus little appeal to the sympathies of men from the sight of suffering and the cry of distress. The danger is that men hear no call to any kind of social activity and that part of their nature lacks healthful exercise. True, the tramp and the beggar knock at the door of the suburban home, but it is the woman, not the man, who answers, wisely or unwisely, the appeal. The tendency, then, of the suburban community is to devote itself to selfish interests, keeping its evenings for a limited range of amusements, card parties and dances, and confining its activities to clubs, women's clubs and men's clubs, which exist mainly to minister to the pleasures of their members, rather than to promote growth or service.

But over against these disadvantages there exists one great advantage. In suburban communities the Church is the one unifying influence. Probably it is not true that the churches of the suburbs are stronger than the churches in the neighboring city. But it is true that a larger proportion of the citizens in suburban communities go to church than in the city. Mr. Booth, in his "Labor and Life of London," declares that "in London the poor (except the Catholic poor) do not attend service on Sunday," and "the working man does not come to church." But "the residents of the suburbs crowd their churches and chapels, and support with impartiality and liberality all forms of organized religion." Mr. Masterman compares five suburban parishes with one London parish equal to the five in population, and finds that in the suburban parishes twenty-nine per cent attend church, while in the London parish there were but six per cent. No figures are at hand with which to compare conditions in American suburbs, but the statement will doubtless be accepted by anyone who has observed conditions, that similar facts hold true in this country. A consider-

able proportion of the population of suburban communities attend church. But here again the danger is that the suburban influence will tend to confine the activities of these church attendants within comparatively narrow and selfish limits, the cultivation of a comfortable religious self-satisfaction. It is apparently the case that one Sunday morning service measures, for a large proportion of the people, the limit of activity even of those who do go to church. Nevertheless, it is the Church alone which succeeds in getting the people together in any considerable number and with any frequency, in these suburban communities. Obviously, then, the Church and its ministry enjoy a great opportunity, and upon them is placed a great responsibility. The Church is the strongest social organ in these communities. If anything is to enlist the social activities of the men and women, it must be the Church.

And the word church is employed intentionally to represent the whole religious organism of the community. For if the social activity is to be best developed, it must be by the united effort of all the religious organizations. Especially in such a community should the churches co-operate, not only in order to counteract that cliquishness which will otherwise inevitably exist, but so that they may effectively minister to the whole community and enlist all its members in such common activities as are desirable.

What are some of the social activities in which suburban churches may be engaged? Doubtless this is a problem to be decided in each community by local conditions. But it may be helpful to consider what has been accomplished in certain places.

Let us take, for example, a town where there is no local paper devoted to the higher interests of the people. It is feasible, for this has been successfully accomplished, for the ministers of the different churches to constitute themselves a board of editors to conduct a periodical in which the religious, educational, political and social welfare of the community shall be discussed. In one suburban town of seven thousand inhabitants such a paper, published monthly, was carried on for several years by the ministers of the churches, until the citizens were ready to take in hand and support a weekly paper of similar high standard. This paper became the medium through which the most public-spirited citizens appealed to the community for any kind of desired improvement. Not only were the interests of the churches considered and fos-

tered, but by this means the false barrier which too often exists between the Church and the life of the community was broken down. The idea at least was promoted that whatever was for the best life of the people was a matter in which ministers and churches should be concerned. Nor was the co-operation of the ministers of different denominations in such work without effect in fostering harmony among the members of their parishes. And of exceeding value was the opportunity thus offered to enlist the services of the ablest men in the community, gaining them a hearing and spreading their counsel far more widely than otherwise had been possible.

By similar co-operation an organization may be created for the alleviation of such distress as may occasionally occur. For while in such communities there will be no large number of very poor people, yet there may, many times, be need of providing temporary assistance, sufficient to tide over some particular experience of distress. Fire may destroy the dwelling and clothing of a day laborer and his family, who would not ordinarily need assistance, or sickness may overwhelm a household. It is well if there may be in a community at such a time a Friendly Aid Committee, able to provide clothing at once out of its stores, or to furnish the services of a trained nurse. Such a committee, also composed of members from the different churches, would guard against imposture, prevent injudicious assistance that would pauperize those aided, and in general act in the small community in some such way as do the Associated Charities in the large city. Where the person to be assisted is a member of one of the parishes proper officials of the church concerned may be notified, and thus aid may be assured and extended in the quietest and most judicious manner. A district nurse, employed under the direction of such a committee, can be of very great service in any community, giving counsel where other service is not needed and standing ready to help in any emergency.

One of the most encouraging signs of the times is the spread of the village improvement or town betterment movement. This is not a matter of mere esthetic or financial interest, but concerns also the moral welfare of the people. For neatness and the love of beauty do not live in comfortable company with rowdiness and gross vice. One of the strongest influences in some towns against admitting the liquor traffic is the knowledge that the neatness and

beauty which have been fostered for years would be besmirched by such business. The spirit which fosters village improvement is a healthful influence with which to surround children and youth. Ministers, therefore, and the Church, in such ways as are feasible, may wisely instigate and cherish any movement which is intended to promote the beauty and cleanliness of a town. But the modern movement includes anything which is for the betterment of the community, the enrichment of the public library and its use as a social center, the promotion of a good lecture course, the purchase of a public playground, the development of school gardens, the placing of historic memorial tablets. All of these and other similar efforts which are for the welfare of a community should receive the earnest support of the ministry and the churches.

One of the strongest influences in forwarding the social work of the Church is, undoubtedly, the men's club in the church. Here is an organization which has sprung into vigorous existence in recent years and is multiplying with amazing speed. It is especially adapted to the suburban church. Here are men of ability, business men, professional men, young and old, the most important latent force in the community. How shall their services be enlisted? The men's club answers the question. It is not technically a religious organization; that is, it does not exist primarily for the purpose of leading men to study the Bible, or inducing them to speak on religious themes in the meetings of the Church. It is primarily a social club. It gathers the men together and enables them first to become acquainted with each other and then to act together for any cause in which they may become interested. Some of these clubs have a beneficiary feature and hold a portion of their dues in a fund for the benefit of their members in case of sickness or death. It would seem that such a plan might wisely be more widely adopted. "Permit me to ask," says Dr. Reuen Thomas, "whether every Christian congregation ought not to be a mutual aid society? Why should men and women who want to make some provision against sickness and death and to secure old age pensions be obliged to join fraternities outside the churches? Why should they have to become Freemasons and Foresters and Odd Fellows and I know not what else in order to get the provision they need? Why should not the mutual aid of which I have been speaking organize itself into some practical force as a part of our Church

life?" In fact, this form of social activity in the church, especially where there are large numbers of working men, has been very successful. But, apart from this, the men's club may become an agent for imparting information concerning all kinds of social work and for the furthering of social reformation. Men are beginning to realize that the forwarding of the Kingdom of God is not simply a matter of establishing missions and holding religious services. That end is also being attained when men are helping to Christianize social conditions, destroying slums, abolishing sweat-shops, rescuing children from health-destroying labor in mines and factories, diminishing crime; when they are promoting right relations between employer and employee, guiding the conduct of business into fair and righteous ways, cultivating justice, peace and good will among men.

Men's clubs are doing good work in these ways by getting acquainted with social conditions in their own communities, and in the cities in which their members labor, by getting in touch with civic leagues, good government clubs, children's aid societies, associated charities, and other similar organizations. One such men's club in a suburban church devoted all its meeting for one year to gaining a better understanding concerning all the departments of the city with which they were connected, in order that they might better comprehend the local problem of good government. The discussion of industrial, economic and social questions by such men as compose the membership of the congregations of suburban communities is one of the most fruitful methods by which the social work of the churches is promoted.

And in many such suburban communities there is one fact which should never be forgotten. They are largely composed, very often, of men who have moved out from the city to the suburban town. Still more often they are almost entirely composed of men whose business interests are in the city. In each case they owe a debt to the city. The suburban churches should give hearty and generous support to the various kinds of social work undertaken in the metropolis to which they owe so much. They should have a share in the activities of the institutional churches, social settlements, civic leagues, and other organizations which are seeking to promote better social conditions in the city. These organizations are in great need of workers. And the suburban churches are in

great need of work. It is a serious misfortune for any church to lack activities which appeal to the generosity, self-sacrifice and personal service of its members. Let the men from these favored communities, where so little personal work is needed, lend their aid to those in the cities who are staggering under heavy burdens. It is no credit to the Protestant churches that they have so uniformly moved out of the densely crowded sections of our large cities. The error can be remedied only when they who have moved to the suburban churches, where there is so little poverty and suffering, send back some of their superfluous energy to help perform the great tasks undertaken by the heroic souls who remain at the post of duty.

These are some of the ways by which churches in suburban communities may engage in social work for the welfare of others, and at the same time counteract those selfish and narrowing tendencies which, in the nature of the case, threaten their own welfare.